

MERSHON AUDITORIUM HISTORY

Mershon Auditorium is the realization of a dream long held at Ohio State University for a meeting place of quality and size, adequate for the needs of the campus. It provides an appropriate environment for inspiration and cultural enrichment through the artistry of the performing arts of music, drama, the dance and the spoken word. That it has become an important and popular meeting place for students, faculty, alumni and central Ohio citizens is attested to by the reports of these simple statistics: More than 1,850,000 patrons have attended 1200 major programs and events in the first 12 years of its operation.

The auditorium was officially dedicated in appropriate ceremonies on April 29, 1957, during which the portrait of Ralph Davenport Mershon was unveiled. It was the income from the generous bequest from Colonel Mershon that made erection of the building possible. Colonel Mershon, an Ohio State University graduate of 1890, left a large bequest to the University. He had often expressed a feeling that an auditorium was needed as an addition to the equipment and buildings of the University.

The completion of the auditorium and its first program on April 22, 1957, with Rise Stevens in a magnificent song recital, marked the culmination of efforts of Vice President and Business Manager Jacob B. Taylor and former President Howard Bevis to commemorate the man whose generosity and devotion to the University brought it an unparalleled bequest. The original bequest appreciated more than Colonel Mershon had

anticipated; therefore, a small portion of the increased revenue, at Vice President Taylor's suggestion, was used to build the auditorium that serves in so many ways the goals Colonel Mershon had envisioned. While Colonel Mershon did not request that a structure be built in his memory, nevertheless the auditorium is a memorial erected in recognition to his lifelong devotion to the University and of his appreciation of good music and the theater. He considered these a part of every man's education. The \$3 million structure was built from income from the unrestricted half of Colonel Mershon's generous bequest.

Before Colonel Mershon's death on February 14, 1952, plans were already under way for the construction of a University Auditorium. According to the minutes of the Board of Trustees of October 18, 1949, Vice President Taylor recommended to the Board that the auditorium be considered a "going project" and the architectural firm of Bellman, Gillett & Richards of Toledo, who also designed the Ohio Union, be engaged. The target amount for construction and equipment costs was set at \$2.5 million. There was some delay until November 1950 relating to preparation of plans. Steps were taken in that year so that the University Cabinet approved and recommended to the State Director of Public Works a contract for drawing of plans for the auditorium.

Bids were taken December 21, 1954. Funds were approved by the Board of Trustees on January 10, 1955 and contracts awarded January 24, 1955 to the general contracting firm of Messer & Sons,

Inc., of Cincinnati. Members of the Board of Trustees during this time were John Bricker, Forrest Ketner, James Huffman, Robert Black, Carlton Dargusch, Robert Gorman and Charles Kettering. Ground was broken on February 2, 1955.

Ralph D. Mershon came to Ohio State University in 1886 when the University was only 13 years old and had a total enrollment of only 148 plus one graduate student. He enrolled in mechanical engineering with three other students and graduated in 1890. He loved the theater and cultural events and often deprived himself of necessities to meet the price of tickets. Col. Mershon began teaching at OSU at the beginning of the 1890-91 school year as Assistant Professor in the Physics Department under Stillman W. Robinson. Later he became an inventive genius in the electrical industry and made a fortune from patents on his many inventions. There were 93 United States patents granted for his inventive work.

Fred Stecker, who was Director of the Ohio Union, was commissioned early in 1956 by President Bevis as a Special Assistant to the President, to investigate possibilities for a person to serve as auditorium manager and to make a survey of auditorium operations in the "Big 10".

Mr. Stecker visited the University of Minnesota, Purdue University, University of Wisconsin, University of Michigan, Michigan State University and Indiana University. The transcripts of Mr. Stecker's investigations proved to be very valuable information in establishing the Mershon Auditorium administrative organization.

It was on one of these visitations that Mr. Stecker met Donald H. Horton, at that time manager of Indiana University auditorium. The acquaintanceship resulted later in Mr. Horton's being appointed by the Board of Trustees, at its September 1956 meeting, as Director of Concerts and Lectures and Manager of Mershon Auditorium. Mr. Horton reported for duty early in October 1956 and has been on continuous appointment since that time.

The Auditorium is a simple and dignified expression of contemporary design with a classical feeling to harmonize with buildings in the vicinity. It was designed by the Bellman, Gillett and Richards architectural firm of Toledo in cooperation with the late Howard Dwight Smith, former University Architect.

The exterior of the building is of Indiana limestone laid in coursed ashlar pattern. The base is of Diamond Pink granite. In its overall dimensions the building is 200 feet long and 181 feet wide and contains in excess of two million cubic feet. The seating area of the building is 130 feet wide, 160 feet long and 52 feet high. The terrace on three sides of the front of the building is of Tennessee Crab Orchard Stone, with the walls of the first floor foyer in Alps Grey and Golden Buff marble.

The building accommodates 3,072 patrons with 1,495 seats on the main floor and 1,577 spaces in the three sections of the balcony. Because of the large capacity of the balcony and its arrangement, Mershon Auditorium audiences sit in much closer proximity to the stage than in other modern auditoriums of approximately the same size.

Prominent among its features is an orchestra lift with rising platforms adaptable for the various positions of an orchestra. In addition to its use for enlarging the stage, it is used frequently for enlargement of the main floor seating area, with temporary chairs set on it.

As an adjunct to the thoroughly modern heating and ventilating equipment, the building is equipped with a cooling system and an electrostatic device which continuously filters and removes dust and pollen from the air.

In acoustic treatment, design for which the firm of Bolt, Beranek, and Newman was consultant, the east wall is polycylindrical; the ceiling is splayed or "saw-toothed," and the back wall is of vertically mounted wood ribs over a deep sound-absorbent blanket.

The Auditorium stage is 40 feet deep and 100 feet wide, 67 feet high from stage floor to gridiron, with a proscenium opening of 55 feet width and 25 feet height. It is designed to accommodate any type of performance from a single speaker to grand opera. The equipment of the Auditorium stage includes 53 working lines and battens in the counter-weighted flying system, the most modern and up-to-date lighting devices including a large number of spotlights, floodlights and border lights, an electronic switchboard and a power transfer panel. A booth at the left rear of the main floor houses controls for both lighting and public address systems. The Auditorium has 16 mm arc sound motion

picture equipment, an arc slide projector and arc spotlights in its projection booth.

In the Fall of 1957 the Auditorium was equipped with a fine three-manual pipe organ, the pipe chambers for which are behind the metal grillwork on the left side of the seating area. The console is portable and usable in several positions on the orchestra lift and the stage proper. The organ was designed, manufactured and installed by the Schantz Organ Company of Orrville, Ohio.

To the east of the stage are three floors of dressing rooms and costume rooms. Four "star" dressing rooms and a "Green Room" are located on the stage floor level. Beneath the stage are an orchestra room and dressing rooms for both men and women musicians, as well as storage rooms for stage equipment. Adjacent to the Auditorium stage on the west side is a large scenery work room also used for the receiving of scenery for theatrical touring companies which appear at the Auditorium from time to time.

An adjoining underground and ground level parking area provides space for the accommodation of more than 400 cars.

The Auditorium accommodates the attractions of the University's officially sponsored GREAT ARTIST SERIES, a concert program presenting the highest quality concert artists available in the fields of music, drama and the dance. The programs of the University's CELEBRITY SERIES also were presented here until discontinued in 1963. The "FAR HORIZONS"

WORLD TRAVEL FILM SERIES succeeded the CELEBRITY SERIES and has presented world-renowned lecturers and films on a variety of subjects. Both series were conceived as an outreach of the University toward the enrichment of the cultural life of the "University Family" as well as the central Ohio community. Both the GREAT ARTIST and the "FAR HORIZONS" WORLD TRAVEL FILM SERIES are self-supporting enterprises without expenditure of tax funds. Response to these events has been gratifying. Attendance at the presentations in both series has attained noteworthy proportions with "sellouts" or "near sellouts" more often the rule than the exception.

Recital artists, orchestras, theatre groups and dance attractions which have appeared on the GREAT ARTIST SERIES have included the Cleveland Orchestra; Cincinnati Symphony; Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra; Detroit Symphony Orchestra; Pittsburgh Symphony and Chicago Symphony; Marian Anderson, contralto; sopranos Roberta Peters and Eileen Farrell; Richard Tucker and Jan Peerce, tenors; Jerome Hines, Metropolitan Opera Association basso; Isaac Stern, violinist; Rudolph Serkin, John Browning and Alexander Brailowsky, pianists. The ballet presentations have included American Ballet Theatre; National Ballet of Washington; National Ballet of Canada; Royal Winnipeg Ballet, San Francisco Ballet, Harkness Ballet and the Ballet Folklorico de Mexico; Martha Graham Dance Company and the Hungarian National Folk Ensemble.

Other outstanding programs have included the Robert Shaw Chorale; Roger Wagner Chorale; I Solisti di Zagreb; the great French mime, Marcel Marceau; the New York Choral Arts Society; New York Little Orchestra and soloists in a presentation of "L'Enface du Christ"; the Royal Shakespearean Theatre in "The Hollow Crown"; and ten presentations by the New York City Opera Company.

CELEBRITY SERIES programs have included: Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg, venerable American poets; General Carlos P. Romulo, Philippine ambassador; Dr. Ralph Sockman, distinguished clergyman; Vincent Price, noted actor, art critic and fine arts historian; Norman Cousins, Editor of the Saturday Review; Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt; Dr. Wernher Von Braun; Richard Dyer-Bennet, folksong specialist, tenor and guitarist; Julien Bryan, exhibiting his color films on "Modern Japan" and "Poland"; Virgil Fox, organist at Riverside Church of New York; Pierre Cochereau, organist of Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris; Anna Russell, concert comedienne; and Ohio-born Hal Holbrook in "Mark Twain Tonight".

The area of wholesome popular entertainment included appearances of the Dave Brubeck Quartet; the George Shearing Quintet; Fred Waring and the Pennsylvanians; Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong; the Brothers Four; Kingston Trio; Peter, Paul and Mary; John Davidson; John Gary; Harry Belafonte; Robert Goulet; The Four Seasons; Four Saints; Four Freshman; Bill Cosby; Smokey Robinson and the Miracles and Roger Williams.

The Auditorium cooperates closely with the School of Music in the presentation of public concerts of the University Symphony Orchestra, the University Concert and Buckeye Bands, the University Chorus, the University Symphonic Choir and both the Men's and Women's Glee Clubs. Among other performances in the new Auditorium have been plays, mass meetings, "sings", and variety shows of student groups with the building providing a magnificent backdrop for the emerging talent of young men and women of this campus. Notable performances by the School of Music include "South Pacific;" "Guys and Dolls;" "Oklahoma;" "West Side Story;" "Music Man;" "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying;" "La Perichole;" "My Fair Lady;" and "Carmen."

The building is operated by a full-time staff of 12 people.